

## A Caged songbird escape into the arms of predator - Lullaby 181[ 836 words ]

At those words, Elissa's entire back went rigid in an instant.

If she and Rowan were truly in a legitimate relationship—if everyone could see it—she'd have no choice but to come clean.

But that wasn't the case. The truth was, they were lovers. And if that ever got out, everyone would judge her the same way: with contempt.

No one would blame Rowan, of course. The disdain would be for her alone.

They'd say she'd clung to Rowan's coattails all those years ago, using their "sibling" bond to secure a spot in the Murphy family—so desperate to hold on, she'd even stooped to being his mistress.

"Marcia!"

Frank's eyes flashed cold as he cut Marcia off sharply. "What are you even thinking? Elissa and Rowan are brother and sister."

Years ago, Elissa had been willing to break it off with Rowan, just to marry him. Frank had always known, deep down, that in her heart, there was no comparison—he would always come first. He'd never once doubted her relationship with Rowan.

Bradley and the others frowned, glancing at Frank. "Frank, maybe you should take her home. She's ruining the mood."

Everyone knew what the deal was between Rowan and little Elissa.

Who was Marcia, some outsider—some homewrecker—to run her mouth here?

Frank checked the time; it was still early enough. He nodded and shot Marcia a look. "Let's go."

Elissa was a little surprised. Frank wasn't nearly as protective of Marcia as he used to

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He didn't wait for Marcia to react, just took her by the arm and led her straight to the elevator, heading for the parking garage.

Humiliated in front of everyone, Marcia was stunned. “What did I say wrong? Look for yourself—Elissa is wearing the same lipstick as Rowan today!”

It wasn’t just the lipstick.

There was something off about the way Rowan and Elissa acted around each other.

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Brother and sister? Only these clueless men would buy that. What kind of sister leaves her brother’s house with her ears burning red?

“That’s enough!”

Frank had had it with her accusations. He shoved her back against the car, fury in his voice. “You insisted on coming, so I let you tag along. Now you can leave, alright?”

“Frank, do you really hate me that much now?”

Just yesterday, Frank had tossed divorce papers in her face, told her he and Elissa were done.

But Marcia was afraid he was lying to her.

She’d come today to see for herself, to make sure Elissa and Frank really were over.

Frank didn’t just hate her—he wrenched open the car door, shoved her inside, and told Ridge, “Take her home. Now.”

Marcia couldn’t force the door open; she rolled down the window and grabbed Frank’s sleeve. “So when are you taking me to get a marriage license?”

Frank shook her off, smoothing down his cuff. “I’ve already arranged it. The paperwork will be delivered tomorrow.”

“Frank...”

Marcia was quick; she gritted her teeth and pressed on. “You’re lying to me, aren’t you? The divorce certificate—it’s fake, isn’t it?”

He’d shoved the divorce papers at her, and she’d had no choice but to accept it.

But as for the marriage license—if he really meant to marry her, wouldn’t he just take her to city hall and do it himself, instead of handing it off to someone else?

It could only mean one thing: he was lying to her, stringing her along.

But he’d forgotten—she was never as easy to fool as Elissa!

Frank’s eyes turned ice-cold, his patience snapped. He yanked open the car door again and gripped her throat, his voice low and deadly. “Marcia, don’t push your luck.”

“You should be grateful I’m even willing to lie to you. But since you’re so determined to make this ugly...”

His patience finally ran out.

Ignoring Marcia’s frantic struggles, he met Ridge’s eyes in the rearview mirror. “Take

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her back to the house outside town. Lock her in the basement—no food, no water.”

Marcia’s eyes went wide with horror. “What are you planning—”

“Aren’t you clever? Figure it out.”

Frank released her neck, his right hand patting her cheek with a mock tenderness. His voice, though, was pure venom—cold as the devil himself.

“I’m done playing games with you. Stay in that basement and think it over. Think about whether you want to tell me where little Nine is.”

“No food, no water. Seven days—that’s how long a person can last, right? If you can’t make up your mind in seven days... then die.”

He said those last two words so quietly they were almost a whisper.

But Marcia’s whole body broke out in goosebumps.

For the first time, real terror flickered in her eyes. She realized now—this man might be even more ruthless than Rowan’s reputation suggested.

She started to tremble. “If I die, aren’t you afraid you’ll never find her?”

“Marcia, this is the second time you’ve tried to threaten me.”

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## **Chapter 182**

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## **Chapter 182**

Frank pinched her chin, a faint smile playing on his lips. “Tell me, how should I make your death a little more painful? Maybe I’ll let a few vicious guard dogs keep you company in the basement.”

“No! Please-”

Marcia broke down completely. “I-I’ve told you everything. Will you let me go now?”

Frank’s tone softened, almost gentle. “Of course.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

Seeing the sincerity in his expression, Marcia realized she was cornered. Terror made her tremble from head to toe. “The... the people who adopted her back then—they came from Vistapeak City.”

Frank frowned. “Vistapeak City? Are you sure?”

“I’m sure!”

Marcia nodded frantically, desperate for the slightest hope of survival.

Only now did she understand—what she’d done was no better than bargaining with a wolf.

No one could imagine how cruel this man could be beneath his elegant surface.

“I see.”

Frank responded, then slammed the car’s back door shut. He tapped on the driver’s window. “Tell Bernard to get one of the meanest guard dogs we have. Put it with her.”

He straightened slowly, the menace around him fading as he buttoned his suit jacket with unhurried grace. Once again, he was the refined, aristocratic Frank.

He turned and walked up the steps, acting as though he didn't hear Marcia's desperate screams echoing from the car behind him.

Upstairs, the atmosphere was entirely different.

Frank reached the entryway and heard laughter ringing out from the living room.

He changed his shoes and walked in with a smile. "What's so funny in here?"

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"We were just talking about how little Elissa finally agreed to make up with Rowan," someone replied.

Bradley, always quick to speak up for Elissa, didn't even look up. "So, you sent Marcial away? Honestly, I have no idea why you brought her here in the first place."

Frank gave a soft laugh. "Just some unusual circumstances—won't happen again."

"Won't happen again?" Bradley sounded dubious, but when he glanced at Elissa, sitting quietly on the sofa, he swallowed the rest of his words.

Frank noticed too, and with his usual good humor, he added, "From now on, Marcia and I will go our separate ways."

Everyone except Rowan was stunned.

Everyone knew Marcia was his cherished white moon—someone he'd always held close to his heart. He'd just brought her here; why the sudden change of heart? And though Frank was addressing the room, it was clear his words were meant for Elissa.

Not that Elissa cared.

She kept her eyes on her juice, sitting motionless, but she could feel a sharp gaze fixed on her.

She didn't need to look to know—it was Rowan.

That evening, Rowan had dinner delivered from a private restaurant he'd reserved in advance.

When everyone sat down, they instinctively left the seat next to Frank empty, as if saving it for Elissa.

Bradley grinned, "Elissa, why don't you sit here?"

"Sure," Elissa replied, and took the seat without hesitation. She'd never thought of divorce as making them enemies; there was no reason not to act naturally.

She'd barely settled in when someone stomped down on her foot.

She tried to pull back, but the pressure on her foot only increased. Glancing down, she shot a pointed look at the offender.

Above the table, laughter and conversation continued as usual.

Below, Rowan's shoe pressed firmly against her foot, bare skin against leather—blatant, possessive.

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It almost felt... illicit, as if they were having an affair right under everyone's noses.

Rowan's expression was cool and unreadable. His gaze swept over her, then flicked to the narrow space between her and Frank.

He looked perfectly justified, completely oblivious to how undignified it was to step on someone's foot at dinner.

But then, Rowan had never been a gentleman.

It wasn't just about keeping Frank from touching her—he wouldn't even allow Frank to sit close.

Resigned, Elissa inched her chair away, putting enough distance between herself and Frank that another person could have fit between them. Only then did Rowan lift his foot, freeing her.

How childish.

Frank had been chatting with Bradley and the others but noticed Elissa edging away. He turned, his voice gentle. “Still upset about the other day?”

He was referring, of course, to their fake divorce.

Elissa shook her head, her tone calm and even. “Not anymore.”

The divorce was done—what was the point of dwelling on his suggestion?

“Really?”

Frank poured her a drink and leaned in, lowering his voice. “There’s nothing between me and Marcia anymore. We don’t need to keep up the act.”

He remembered that Elissa and Rowan now lived practically across the hall from each other. Smiling, he added, “I had no idea your brother moved in right across from you. It works out well—after we help him settle in, I’ll come by and help you pack up your things. We’ll go home together.”

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### **Chapter 183**

Elissa couldn’t even bring herself to feign interest in conversation.

She knew Frank would always be absorbed in his own schemes; what she thought or felt simply didn’t matter to him.

After dinner, she found an excuse to slip away first. As she walked toward the elevator, Frank hurried after her.

Elissa stopped, forcing herself to swallow the irritation in her voice. “I don’t care what’s going on between you and Marcia. The point is, I’m not moving back in. Not ever.”

“So, you’re still angry?”

Frank looked exasperated. He took a couple steps closer, trying hard to keep his tone patient. “There were reasons I had to go through with the fake divorce, you know. I didn’t have a choice...”

“Frank,” Elissa cut him off, unable to hold back any longer. “You really think the only thing standing between us is that so-called fake divorce?”

The man in front of her—usually so composed and refined—suddenly looked utterly drained, almost suffocating under the weight of it all.

He always managed to conveniently forget everything that had happened between them.

The truth was, they’d been past the point of no return for a long time. He just refused to see it.

Frank hesitated, visibly lost, then softened his voice. “So... what do you want me to do?”

What did she want from him?

If he’d asked her that just days ago, Elissa might’ve had an answer. If he’d only been willing to help save Tanya Foster, maybe she could’ve considered moving back home. But then, he’d asked for a divorce.

So there were no what-ifs. There never had been.

She caught the faint smell of alcohol on him and took a careful step back, her tone calm and deliberate. “I want you to do nothing. Let’s just leave things as they are. That’s enough.”

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Frank frowned. “Just like this?”

“How is this any different from being divorced?” he pressed, his eyes fixed on her face, searching for the warmth and gentleness he used to find there. But now, all he saw was distance.

Elissa met his gaze, tipped her chin up, and licked her lips. “We should’ve gotten divorced a long time ago.”

What she really wanted to say was that they already were—almost. The paperwork was all but done; there was no point complicating things now.

Panic flickered across Frank’s face. Suddenly, he grabbed her wrist. “I told you, I’m not getting divorced. Not now, not ever. We’re never getting divorced.”

But the divorce was already finalized.

Elissa tried to pry herself free, but his grip was unyielding. She drew a steadying breath, struggling to keep her temper in check. “This isn’t up to you alone!”

Seeing that she was determined, Frank’s grip only tightened.

He glared at her, his voice rough. “You want this divorce so badly—what, is it because of that college friend of yours?”

Elissa froze, as if she’d just heard a bad joke. “Excuse me?”

“I’m asking what’s really going on between you and Cliff!”

“There’s nothing going on between us!” Elissa couldn’t hold back her temper any longer, enunciating each word. “Frank, don’t you dare accuse me of what you’re guilty of yourself.”

Frank rarely saw her so riled up. To him, it only proved she had something to hide, and he became even more convinced about her and Cliff. “Fine. Then come home with me.”

He jabbed the elevator button repeatedly, saying nothing more as he tried to drag her along.

Elissa panicked. “Let go of me!”

He ignored her.

“Let go.”

The words were cold and sharp. Rowan was suddenly there at the end of the hallway, his eyes icy as they locked on Frank’s hand gripping Elissa.

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This time, Frank released her even before she could struggle.

Rowan beckoned her over. "Come here."

A wave of relief washed over Elissa. She hurried to his side without hesitation, suddenly feeling safe for the first time all evening.

She looked perfectly docile as she stood next to Rowan.

Seeing her so eager to seek his protection, Rowan's irritation eased a little. He glanced at Frank, a faint, mocking smile on his lips. "You only had to stand outside my door for five minutes before you started harassing her?"

## Chapter 184

### **Chapter 184**

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Frank was clearly a bit wary of Rowan. He forced a smile. "You're overthinking it. I just want to take her home, that's all."

Rowan shot him a cold glance. "And does she want to go?"

On the business front, the Atwater Group and the Murphy Group had always been close partners. Privately, the two men had grown up together, and now, with Rowan and Elissa reconciled, Rowan was practically Frank's brother-in-law.

Frank didn't want to sour things between them again, so he softened his tone. "Couples fight sometimes—nothing out of the ordinary. Arguments at night, making up by morning. It's not as serious as you think."

At the mention of "fighting at night and making up by morning," Elissa instinctively looked up at Rowan. She didn't miss the cold glint that flashed in his eyes.

Suddenly, Rowan reached out and ruffled her hair, smiling. "Honestly, I don't care if you two argue at night and make up by morning, or if you fight today and divorce tomorrow."

“But as long as she doesn’t want to leave, no one is taking her anywhere.”

His words were casual as always, but there was an unmistakable edge—one that left no room for argument.

The commotion drew the others into the room.

Rex immediately sensed the tension crackling between the two men. He walked over and clapped Frank on the shoulder. “If Elissa doesn’t want to move back, just let her stay here for a while. When she’s ready, she’ll decide on her own.”

“Exactly,” Bradley chimed in. He was Frank’s buddy, but he’d seen how Frank had treated little Elissa in the past, and now he joined the chorus.

“Frank, you know, you can’t fix years of distance overnight. If you really want Elissa to come home, she has to want it too. Rowan’s keeping an eye on things here—no one’s going to take advantage of her.”

Frank looked at Elissa from across the room, silent for a long moment.

Bradley’s last point made sense to him—if Cliff wanted to get close to Elissa, he’d have to go through Rowan first.

Finally, Frank let out a heavy sigh. “Fine. When you’re ready, you’re always welcome

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home.”

He turned to Rowan, concern tightening his voice. “I’ll count on you to look after her for now.”

Rowan glanced at the girl beside him and replied in his usual lazy drawl, “Wouldn’t call it a favor.”

“Alright,” Rex interjected, glancing at his watch and waving the others over. “It’s getting late. We should all get going—I still have to drive back to Cresthaven tonight.”

The Wilkinson family had strict traditions. Tomorrow was New Year’s Eve, and everyone was expected back at the old estate first thing in the morning.

After everyone piled into the elevator, Rex hesitated, then turned to Elissa. “By the way, I didn’t see Tanya Foster today—where is she?”

“She...” Elissa looked at Rowan, who gave her a slight nod. Only then did she answer honestly, “She went home for the holidays.”

Rex frowned a little, then gave her a small nod. “Alright. Thanks.”

The elevator doors closed, and the hallway fell quiet.

Elissa let out a long breath, finally able to relax. She couldn’t help but ask, “Is there something going on between Rex and Tanya?”

She’d started to suspect something a few days ago, when she’d picked Tanya Foster up from her place. But Tanya had been sick at the time, and Elissa got the sense she didn’t want to talk about it, so she’d let it go.

Rowan arched an eyebrow. “Want to know?”

“I do.”

“Then go take a shower first.”

Rowan pulled her back inside, steering her toward the master bathroom.

Elissa tensed up. Her period was over, and, ever the responsible doctor, she blurted out, “Did you remember to bring protection?”

Rowan, caught off guard, coughed into his fist but didn’t break stride. He shot her a look, his eyes dark. “Protection?”

“Yeah—condoms.”

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## **Chapter 185**

Elissa had studied traditional medicine, but contraceptives were just another part of a doctor’s everyday life—hardly something to fuss over.

Given how things stood between them, when Rowan told her to go take a shower, her mind naturally jumped to only one conclusion.

She'd come to Rowan of her own accord, asked to be his lover; there was no point pretending otherwise. Best to just go along with it, she thought. The sooner she went to bed, the sooner she could walk away when he inevitably lost interest.

Suddenly, Rowan chuckled and lifted her onto the bathroom counter, bracing one arm next to her thigh. His eyes sparkled with mischief as he leaned in, his voice teasing in her ear, "Didn't you say you wanted to be lovers? Since when do lovers use protection?"

He couldn't have sounded more shameless.

Elissa had prepared herself for this, but her cheeks still flushed at his words. "W-well, you should still be careful," she stammered.

He put on a mock-serious look. "Careful about what? It's not like I'm sick."

That was the last straw. "Rowan! That's not the point and you know it"

Before she could finish, his voice cut through hers, low and commanding. "Call me 'big brother.'"

She remembered—he'd always been hung up on that, correcting her over and over when they were younger, insisting she use the title. If she refused, the conversation simply wouldn't move forward.

So, like she was dealing with a demanding client, Elissa kept her voice flat and emotionless. "Big brother."

Rowan glanced down at her, unimpressed. "Elissa, you weren't this stiff when you were a kid."

Annoyed, she snapped, "Big brother. Okay?"

That was more like it.

She only had two modes: either exasperated or pitifully soft when she needed

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something from him. Rowan, satisfied, raised an eyebrow. For the first time, Elissa realized he actually enjoyed being treated this way.

Seizing the moment, she pressed on, “This isn’t about being sick or *not*. It’s about not risking anyone’s life.”

“Oh? Whose life is at risk?” Rowan looked at her with mock innocence, lips quirked up in a boyish grin. “Why would anyone die?”

Elissa was used to giving medical advice, but she’d never had *to* explain the birds and the bees to Rowan. For any other patient, it would just be biology—nothing awkward about it. But staring into his deep, searching eyes, she felt her breath hitch and blurted out, “If sperm meets an egg, you tell me—doesn’t that risk someone’s life?”

She was completely serious, cheeks flushed a peachy pink under the bathroom light, her skin practically glowing with frustration.

Her breathing was visibly quickening. Rowan suddenly leaned in, their breaths mingling, and when he kissed her, his Adam’s apple bobbed with restrained desire.

It was just a light kiss, but when he pulled back and saw her lashes trembling, he murmured, “No one’s going to die.”

He would never let anything happen to her. If they ever had a child together, he was determined to make sure their life would be perfect.

But Elissa, mind in turmoil, missed the deeper meaning in his words. Anger flared, making her blurt out, “Can you stop joking about this? I know you’ve probably been with a lot of women—maybe you even have kids already-”

Her words were swallowed as Rowan claimed her lips, his kiss fierce and unyielding, leaving no room for protest. The heat in the bathroom thickened, tension crackling between them.

Every time he kissed her like this, Elissa’s knees turned to jelly, her breath catching in her throat. She tried to lean away, but he anticipated it, strong hand at her nape, holding her exactly where he wanted.

She couldn’t resist for long; her voice came out broken and breathless. “Rowan...”

“Call me ‘big brother.’”

Even in the middle of desire, his lips barely leaving hers, he never forgot to correct her.

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A strange new feeling swept over Elissa, and she stopped resisting him. “B-brother,” she whispered.

Her voice, soft and obedient beneath his kisses, made Rowan’s hand at her waist tense, every line of muscle standing out, veins stark and taut beneath his skin.

“Ow!”

Elissa hadn’t expected that the more she yielded, the rougher Rowan became.

That sudden, fierce grip-like he wanted to pull her right into himself.

But Rowan snapped back to his senses in a heartbeat. He loosened his hold, brushed a soothing kiss against her lips, his breath heavy and ragged. “Sorry. Did I hurt you?”

Yet as he stepped away, catching sight of her lashes wet from his kisses, he nearly lost control all over again.

“Shower,” he muttered, throwing the word over his shoulder before striding out to the guest bathroom.

Elissa stared after him, momentarily stunned.

Did he mean... after the shower, they’d go to bed together?

The water in the tub was threatening to overflow. She jumped out, turned off the tap, and hesitated for a second. When it was clear Rowan wasn’t coming back, she crossed the room and closed the bathroom door behind her.

Her toiletries were still right where she’d left them.

Only after soaking in the bath did she realize there was just one white towel hanging on the rack-no spares.

Rowan was a neat freak; she didn’t dare touch anything of his without asking.

Stepping out of the tub, she padded to the door and cracked it open a sliver, calling out for help. “Rowan, is there another towel? If not, can you grab one from my place?”

“Use mine,” came Rowan’s reply as he approached, his voice low and rough. He slipped a nightdress through the gap in the door. “Wear this.”

“Oh, okay.”

Elissa shut the door again. At first, it didn't feel all that strange, but as she dried off,

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the familiar, woodsy scent clinging to the towel drifted up to her nose, and a peculiar feeling crept over her.

She was... using his towel.

She stared down at the towel in her hands, trying to calm herself, but couldn't shake the thought.

This towel belonged to the man she'd called her brother for nine whole years.

No matter how hard she tried to ignore it, that sense of taboo still surged through her.

She didn't know how long she stood there, but eventually she pulled herself together, slipped on the nightdress, and stepped out.

She didn't bother worrying about the fact that, aside from the shirt on her back, she wasn't wearing a thing underneath. After all, it'd all come off soon enough.

She wondered for a moment why he had a woman's nightdress in his place. Maybe it was something an ex had left behind. Or maybe he'd bought it for someone, but they broke up before she ever wore it. It looked brand new, after all.

While she was showering, Rowan had already finished up in the guest bathroom. When he saw her come out, his brow furrowed just slightly. “Why didn't you dry your hair?”

Elissa blinked, her answer flat. “I forgot.”

The nightdress fell to just above her knees, her slim, pale legs bare beneath the hem. Fresh from the bath, her skin looked even more luminous.

“Go wait for me on the bed,” Rowan said, then disappeared into the bathroom.

Elissa sat on the edge of the bed. He soon returned, a hairdryer in hand. The man who always seemed so distant was now quietly patient, blow-drying her hair himself.

His fingers drifted absently over her scalp, gentle yet unfamiliar.

But this wasn't the first time. She'd never liked drying her hair—when she was young, Rowan had done it for her.

Now, wearing another woman's nightdress, Elissa wondered if he'd ever done this for the dress's real owner.

When he finished, Rowan glanced at her, lost in thought. "Weren't you going to ask about Rex and your best friend?"

Elissa looked up at him, dodging the question. "Are we doing it tonight?"

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**Chapter 187**

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Rowan hadn't expected her to be so blunt. He raised an eyebrow, about to reply, when her phone started ringing.

The phone was on the bed between them, and both of them caught the caller ID.

It was Tanya Foster.

It was the middle of the night—if nothing was wrong, Tanya would never be calling now. Elissa snatched up the phone and answered, "Hello? Tanya, is everything okay?"

"I just got back," came Tanya's muffled voice, thick with emotion—she sounded lost. "Why aren't you home?"

Elissa shot upright. "I—I'm at Rowan's. I'll come home right away."

Rowan's expression soured. He pressed her back down by the shoulder, refusing to let her go.

"Who's more important to you, me or Tanya Foster?"

What was this, some grade school drama? Elissa sighed. "Do you want the honest answer?"

Rowan's eyes narrowed. "Yeah."

"Right now? Tanya Foster."

She felt his grip slacken. Worried Tanya really was in trouble, Elissa hurried off.

Rowan watched her leave. His shoulders tensed almost imperceptibly as a flash of self-mockery passed through his eyes.

Right now, it was Tanya Foster.

But before? It had been him.

He'd once been the most important person to that girl he'd practically raised.

But not anymore.

Back home, Elissa kicked off her shoes and spotted Tanya sitting on the carpet, knees drawn to her chest, leaning against the edge of the sofa—a posture that screamed insecurity.

Hearing Elissa come in, Tanya glanced up, red-eyed, drained, but still couldn't resist prying: "You and your 'brother'... there's something going on, isn't there?"

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Elissa blinked, then decided to just lay it all out. "We're together."

She left out the part about being lovers. No reason to bring up the past and make Tanya connect the dots—she'd only feel worse about what happened last time.

"What the-?"

Tanya perked up instantly, all gloom forgotten. "Is Rowan out of his mind? You're his sister! Don't tell me he's been scheming this whole time—"

"Stop, stop." Elissa padded over barefoot, plopped down beside her with a bag of snacks, and tore it open. "We didn't talk for eight years. How exactly would he have been plotting anything?"

"Well, you never know! Maybe eight years ago he already—"

Even Tanya realized she was being ridiculous. Eight years ago, Elissa had only been sixteen. Besides, Rowan never struck her as the type to go for that “raise-your-own” stuff.

She switched gears, her imagination running wild. “Wait, three years ago—was that why he wouldn’t let you marry Frank? Because he had feelings for you?”

“And then you insisted, so he cut you off for three years out of spite?”

“Give it a rest.” Elissa stuffed a cookie into her mouth. “You think this is some romance novel? Real life doesn’t have those kinds of plot twists.”

Nobody plots for years for someone else—not in the real world.

Especially not Rowan.

He was proud and reckless, and with his temperament, if he’d really felt that way, he’d never have circled back to her after all this time.

His ego wouldn’t allow it.

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Whatever he felt for her, at best, it was just a fleeting whim from a spoiled rich boy.

Tanya crunched a potato chip, finally admitting to herself that she’d gone a bit too far with her theories. “So, just now, at his place...?”

Elissa felt her cheeks flush and changed the subject. “Why did you come home so suddenly? Was it your parents again, or did your brother do something this time?”

“Don’t even bring it up.”

Just mentioning it made Tanya’s voice grow tight with frustration. “They’ve set me up on

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a blind date. Said if I go along with it, I’ll get a \$68,000 wedding fund. Add in what they’ve scraped together, and if I chip in a little, it’ll be just enough for the down payment on a nice apartment for my brother.”

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### Chapter 188

“What do you mean? You put all your wedding fund into buying your brother a house?”

“Yeah.”

Tanya Foster rolled her eyes, grabbed a beer, and took a long swig to vent her anger.

“They can keep dreaming. They actually said, ‘You’ve been working for three or four years now, and you’re a lawyer, earning a good salary—you must have plenty saved up, so it’s only natural for you to help your brother out.’”

”

Elissa gave a wry smile, reached over, and gently patted Tanya’s head.

“Your life and your money are yours. As long as you don’t want to give it, they can’t take a single cent from you.”

There was only so much more Elissa could say. No matter how unreasonable Tanya’s family was, they were still her family—people bound by blood. Cutting ties with family is never as easy as it sounds.

Tanya looked up at her, her usual sharpness gone, her voice small and plaintive. “But what if they force me? What if they just won’t take no for an answer?”

Elissa couldn’t help but laugh. “Well, you’ve got me. I can protect you.”

She wasn’t joking—she had enough money to hire Tanya a whole team of bodyguards if it came to that.

The next morning, Elissa and Tanya got up early. They decorated the house with garlands and window decals for the holidays, and took out some of the homemade meatballs Jacqueline and Janice had dropped off to fry them up again.

The festive spirit was just starting to fill the house when the doorbell rang.

Tanya dashed to answer it and returned a minute later, tapping Elissa on the shoulder in the kitchen. “Your ex-husband’s here. Asking for you.”

Elissa frowned. “Can you watch the meatballs for me?”

She handed Tanya the slotted spoon and headed to the door.

Frank didn't come inside. He stood in the doorway, hands tucked into his coat pockets. "Elissa, I'm here to take you back to the manor."

Elissa hesitated.

After the divorce, she'd almost forgotten about this tradition. Spending the holidays at

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**11:38**

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the Atwater estate was practically a family law—no matter how dysfunctional the year had been, the Atwaters always put on a show of togetherness for Christmas.

"All right, give me a minute."

She didn't refuse. "Let me change."

She hadn't planned to go out, and was still in her cozy loungewear. When she'd slipped into something nicer and dabbed on a bit of makeup, she stepped out the door and noticed someone else had appeared outside.

Rowan was standing by the elevator, waiting for the lift to arrive. The tension in the air was palpable—clearly, someone had gotten on his bad side this morning.

Frank must have greeted him already. When Elissa stepped out, Frank spoke quietly. "Let's go."

"Okay."

She walked with him toward the elevator. Out of the corner of her eye, she noticed Rowan's gaze flicker over to her, and she instinctively edged a little further away from Frank.

Only then did Rowan look at her directly. "I'll pick you up from the Atwater place this afternoon. Come back to the manor for dinner."

"You're coming back for Christmas dinner this year?" Elissa was genuinely surprised.

In all these years, Rowan could probably count on one hand the number of times he'd come home for the holidays.

Rowan didn't bother to explain. He just nodded. "Yeah."

“Rowan, there’s no need for you to go out of your way to pick up Elissa.”

Frank spoke up suddenly, glancing at Elissa, his handsome features softening. “I’ll go with her this year.”

Elissa was even more taken aback.

Frank had never spent the holidays at Murphy Manor with her before. Every year, Spencer and Marcia would come back to the manor for Christmas, and Frank would stay at the Atwater estate, barely leaving their side.

This year, Spencer was gone, but Marcia was still Hickey’s mother, so she was expected to return for the holidays.

Since when did Frank have time to accompany her to Murphy Manor?

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Elissa finally found her answer when she arrived at the Atwater estate.

To her surprise, Marcia hadn’t come home for the holidays, but Hickey was there, dutifully staying by Old Mrs. Atwater’s side for once.

They showed up just in time for dinner—barely a minute before the meal was served. They hadn’t even settled in when the butler stepped in to announce that dinner was ready.

Everyone made their way into the dining room and took their seats. Carmela’s displeasure was impossible to miss.

“Amazing. You finally come home for the holidays, but you show up right at dinner time. Anyone who didn’t know better would think you’re the matriarch here!”

It was obvious who she meant.

Elissa pretended not to hear, but Frank couldn’t let it pass. He spoke up, calm and even. “Mom, it’s my fault for not managing our time better. If you have something to say, say it to me.”

“Frank!” Carmela drew in a sharp breath. “Let’s get this straight—I’m your mother. You’re always defending someone else-”

“By ‘someone else,” Elissa suddenly smiled, glancing up at her mother-in-law, “do you mean me, or Marcia?”

If Carmela meant her, Elissa thought, that was deeply unfair. But if she meant Marcia, then she was out of line saying this in front of everyone; she wasn’t about to take the blame for someone else.

Carmela’s face stiffened, her jaw clenched. “It’s only right that Frank looks out for his sister-in-law. He’s just helping Spencer keep an eye on Marcia and her son. Why make such a fuss?”

It was Carmela who’d always worried that Frank might one day marry Marcia. And now, for the family’s reputation, it was Carmela who stubbornly refused to admit it.

Elissa smiled. “If it’s only natural for him to defend Marcia, then isn’t it even more natural for him to defend me? Why be upset?”

“Elissa!” Carmela was fuming, not for the first time at Elissa’s quick tongue. “If you-”

“That’s enough!” Old Mrs. Atwater’s voice cut through, stern and cold as she looked at

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**11:38**

Chapter 189

Carmela. “Carmela, so the kids were a little late. It’s the holidays. Let’s not make a scene over nothing.”

“Yes, Mother.” Carmela’s bravado deflated; she’d always been intimidated by her mother-in-law.

Midway through dinner, Frank’s phone buzzed. He leaned over to Elissa and whispered, “Eat. I need to take this call.”

“Okay.” Elissa blinked, a little puzzled by his sudden formality. He’d never used to step away just to take a call, let alone tell her about it.

She peeled shrimp with her hands, about to dip it in sauce, when a maid brought out dessert—and promptly spilled half a bowl of mango pudding all over her sleeve.

“I’m so sorry, Mrs. Frank, my hand slipped!”

“It’s fine,” Elissa reassured her, waving away the apology. “I’ll take care of it.”

She left for the restroom, figuring the spill was limited to her sleeve and could be washed out quickly.

As she passed by the back garden, she overheard Frank’s voice: “Are you sure you can find her?”

“As long as you can get any lead on her, spare no expense.”

Elissa paused, her steps faltering, before she’d had a chance to process what she’d heard, Frank noticed her.

He looked guilty, lowering his voice to wrap up the call before walking over.

Elissa forced a smile. “Marcia’s missing?”

“No,” Frank shook his head. Bernard had just called to say they were close to finding out which family in Vistapeak City had adopted little Nine all those years ago. But he wasn’t sure how to explain that to Elissa.

Elissa couldn’t think of anyone else he’d go to such lengths for, but she didn’t press. “I need to clean up.”

The mango pudding turned out to be much harder to wash off than she’d expected.

She scrubbed at her sleeve under the tap for ages, but the stain only faded a little.

They were supposed to join the Murphy family for New Year’s dinner later, and she could already imagine the old Mrs. Murphy’s pointed remarks if she saw the stain.

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Lost in frustration, Elissa was startled by a sudden knock on the restroom door.

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She turned off the faucet, blotting the dampness from her sleeve with a paper towel as she made her way to the door. When she opened it, she found Frank standing outside, his expression warm and gentle. In his hands was a change of clothes.

Elissa blinked in surprise. “How did you know...?”

Frank smiled and playfully pinched her cheek. “Your husband isn’t blind, you know. I saw you got something on your clothes. Go ahead and change.”

He handed her the clothes, his words carrying a teasing undertone—something he’d never used with her before. He had never called himself her husband, either.

Feeling a bit awkward, Elissa closed the door behind her, wondering what had gotten into him.

She changed quickly, and as she stepped out, about to walk back to the dining room, she overheard voices coming from behind the ornate divider: Frank and Carmela were arguing about something.

Carmela’s tone was always gentle with Frank. “My biggest regret is ever agreeing to your marriage to her. A woman of her background is entirely beneath you. If you divorced her, you could find someone truly suitable, don’t you see that?”

“Mom, she had no say in how she was born,” Frank replied, his voice cold. “And I’ve already told you—if it isn’t her, I’ll marry no one.”

From where Elissa stood, hidden by the antique screen, she was invisible to them.

Carmela frowned deeply. “You used to shield Marcia with everything you had. I never saw you take Elissa’s side like this. So what’s changed? Now you can’t live without her?”

The comment nearly made Elissa laugh. It was true—Frank’s devotion to Marcia had been obvious to everyone. Marcia had always seemed more important to him than his own wife.

Frank was silent for a moment before answering, his voice low and steady. “That’s right. I can’t live without her. And Marcia won’t be part of the Atwater family anymore.”

Maybe, Elissa thought, he finally cared for her. Maybe he’d cared for a long time.

Frank first realized it at the mall, watching Elissa have lunch with Cliff. The sudden

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clutch of jealousy in his chest had been almost unbearable.

Later, he'd confided in Bradley, who just shook his head and joked he was doomed—caught between two women. But Frank knew better. He had never felt that way about Marcia. Seeing her with other men never bothered him. When his older brother and Marcia became a couple, Frank only hoped his brother treated her well.

But with Elissa... It didn't matter how good Cliff was to her—Frank felt as if a thousand ants were gnawing at his heart. Even a single smile she shared with Cliff stung his eyes.

Carmela's brow furrowed even deeper. "Are you absolutely sure you know what you're doing?"

Frank's answer was unwavering. "I've never been more certain."

He just hadn't figured out how to explain everything to Elissa once he found little Nine. But once he did, he intended to tell her everything.

Carmela, furious, hurled her glass of red wine hard against the wall. "You've lost your mind!"

Behind the screen, Elissa stood frozen. She'd heard Frank's words—every one of them—yet they seemed to have come too late.

She'd never been one to look back.

After dinner, Hickey tugged at Frank's sleeve, begging him to come play ball in the backyard. The two left together, and Carmela immediately turned to Elissa. "Upstairs. Now."

Elissa lowered her eyes and followed, silent, up the steps.

Once inside the study, the door barely closed, Carmela got straight to the point. "You and Frank need to hold off on announcing the divorce."

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**Chapter 191**

